

Abraham Lincoln



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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

A Sermon

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One hundred and twelve years ago yesterday, Abraham Lincoln was born in a rude log cabin in Kentucky. He came of very humble parentage. His father is described as "shiftless, restless, unsuccessful, working now as a carpenter and now as a farmer and could not read or write before his marriage." The future great President of the United States grew up in pioneer surroundings, enduring severe hardships and knowing only the primitive manners, conversation and ambitions of sparsely settled backwoods communities. Schools were rare, and in fact the total of Abraham Lincoln's schooling amounted to less than twelve months. The family was continually on the move from Kentucky to Indiana and from Indiana to Illinois, always deeper and deeper into the frontier wilderness of those days. No boy apparently could have had more unpropitious surroundings. It would be difficult to conceive of one as having fewer opportunities. The poorest workingman's family in this city today is in affluence compared with the position in which Lincoln was born. The poorest workingman's children in Cleveland enjoy advantages of education and contacts with a highly developed civilization which are beyond the wildest dreams in which Abraham Lincoln ever indulged.

But there were two wonderful influences in his life without which he could never have attained his astounding greatness. The first of these was his own mother. It is said that a cloud rests upon her birth, that who her father was is not known, but she was distinctly superior in intellect and character to the social class in which she was born, infinitely superior to the shiftless, illiterate husband whom she married, who, as I have said, could not even read or write until he

married her. She lived only nine years after her son Abraham Lincoln came, but during those very formative years of his childhood she taught him to read and impressed upon his mind whatever elements of worthy character she herself possessed. The other enduring influence in his life was that of his stepmother, whom his father married the year following his mother's death. She not only greatly improved the conditions in that humble home by her thrift, but she inspired her stepson to study and avail himself of every possible opportunity, meager as such opportunities were, to improve his mind and prepare himself for a larger and more useful life. Under this inspiring influence, in early boyhood he read and re-read the Bible, Æsop's Fables, Robinson Crusoe, the Pilgrim's Progress, Weem's Life of Washington, and a history of the United States, which were about all the books available to him; but later he succeeded in borrowing from some neighbor a copy of Burns and one of Shakespeare, which he read with intense interest and appreciation. Among these few books which fell into the hands of the growing boy you notice some of the masterpieces of the world's literature. The authorized version of the Bible, and the Pilgrim's Progress and Shakespeare are universally recognized as the finest examples of pure English in the language, and one could not read and re-read the Bible and the Pilgrim's Progress without being influenced by their moral and spiritual ideals, nor could he study Shakespeare without catching a vision of that common human nature which in the last analysis identifies the prince and the peasant, and makes of one blood all classes and conditions of men however diverse their circumstances in life. Years later, when Abraham Lincoln was at the helm of the nation, in the desperate days of the Civil War, the molding influ-

ence of these books in shaping his character is, I think, very discernible in his essential religiousness and in his attitude to public questions, as they also unquestionably made him the master of such terse and elegant diction as is exemplified in his address at Gettysburg. But what I am here endeavoring to make clear is the influence of his step-mother upon the growing lad in urging him and inspiring him to make use of the few opportunities he had. If the Nation owes a great debt to Abraham Lincoln, it owes it first of all to two women: to his own mother, who gave him all she had to give of a life superior to his surroundings, and to his second mother, who inspired him to make the most of his life. It was their gentleness that made him great, the gentility of a fine and true womanhood, unfamiliar, no doubt, with much of the etiquette and convention of polite society, not much acquainted with the world of cities, but the gentility of noble souls which fashioned the mind of the growing boy to an appreciation of the really finest and noblest things in life. It was their gentleness that made him great.

But we must not identify greatness with conspicuous position, nor even with the possession or exercise of power; and we must not identify gentleness with the softer virtues alone. We speak of Alexander the Great, of Herod the Great, and of similar dominant figures in the history of mankind whose greatness consisted only in their possession of certain forces of mastery over their fellow-men, of a determined self-will joined with talents for leadership, and a cleverness of judgment which enabled them to anticipate the course of events and bend the opinions of others to their own desires. Abraham Lincoln possessed a number of these dominant qualities himself, but we never think of any of them when we think of his

greatness. They were all of them servants to something else in his life; that something else was the soul of the man, his sense of fairness and justice, his tender sympathy for and pardon of the tired soldier boy who was going to be shot for having fallen asleep while on duty, his love for and understanding of humanity, his freedom from the hatreds and petty jealousies of little men, his charity toward his enemies, his passion for righteousness in the largest sense of that word. All these are qualities of the soul. It was the soul of Lincoln that made him the most worshipped figure in American history, with the possible exception of Washington; not simply his political achievements, conspicuous as they were, but the greatness of his soul. "With malice toward none, with charity for all." Those words are the keynote of his life. And so as the years go by and we see him in ever lengthening perspective, he grows larger and larger, no longer a national figure, but a world-possession; the Englishman Drinkwater dramatizes his wonderful life, his statue rises in foreign cities. He belongs to universal humanity, because he incarnated humanity's soul. "Now he belongs to the ages;" and sleeping quietly in obscure graves are two women whose gentleness made him great.

And now, if you have caught my meaning, you will realize, I think, that there are many great souls all around us in the ordinary walks of life who do not possess the talent, the opportunity or perhaps the desire to rise to conspicuous places in the eyes of the world, but who are great nevertheless in the sense in which Lincoln was great—people with big, all-embracing souls who love humanity with something like a passion, who are above all pettiness and jealousies, who are essentially religious in the finest and truest meaning of that word. Some of these

people were not born that way, some of them were in very unfortunate environments, where their lives were made bitter by their battles with the world and by their contacts with coarse and unprincipled men, and they became cynical and sharp in their speech, censorious and unlovely. But one day they found themselves in a different environment. They came in contact with people of a different sort, with people who were kind and just and gentle and lovely. At first they were suspicious of them. They did not believe they could be genuine. They did not believe there were any really disinterested people in the world. They thought this beautiful atmosphere in which they found themselves was only a subtle atmosphere of hypocrisy. And so they were on the defensive and carried into their new environment their old attitude of defiance and sharpness and cynicism and made it a bit trying for their new friends. But after a while it began to dawn upon them that these people were real, that their love for humanity was sincere, that their gentleness was the natural expression of their souls. And a great change began to come over them. Their cynicism faded away, their critical spirit disappeared. Their very voices dropped to lower and sweeter tones, and a new love was born within them, a love for humanity, and everything that is fine and noble and worthy. From being disagreeable cynics, harsh and critical, they became great souls, lovable and loved. It was their contact with these other people that made them so. It was their gentleness that made them great.

There is no finer word in the English language than gentility. It is not the exclusive possession of any particular social class. You may find it in all classes, and you may discover its absence in all. Gentility is a quality of soul, a refinement of the spirit, an

appreciation of everything that is pure and lovely and of good report. Wheresoever it exists it creates an atmosphere which is instantly recognized by those who enter it. The coarse and vulgar are ashamed in its presence, because they are conscious of something here so much finer than themselves. Gentility is not weakness; it may be as firm as adamant without ceasing to be gentle. It is not merely a matter of manners. Lincoln's mother and stepmother probably knew little of the gracious forms of cultivated society. It is, as I have said, an appreciation of the finest and noblest things in life, and that they possessed and impressed upon their son. There is nothing in all the world which is so influential in making souls great as gentility. The Apostle John had a small soul when Jesus chose him as one of the twelve. In his hatred of the Samaritans he wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume their village. He was one of the two disciples who tried to steal a march on the other ten by getting a priority appointment in the cabinet of that Kingdom which he supposed Jesus was about to set up in Jerusalem. He was the man who forbade another to heal sick people because he had not joined himself to their company. But this hating, worldly-minded, narrow-souled apostle became the great apostle of love. "Little children, love one another" is His message to the world for the last nineteen centuries. It is the gentleness of Jesus that made him great. He could not live in that companionship and remain what he was.

We have the making of souls in our hands. It depends upon the influence and atmosphere of our lives. Let us take this text to our homes this morning, and think of it many times in the days to come: "Thy Gentleness hath made me Great."

